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July 6, 2001

Plan to Drill in Great Lakes Turns Politics Upside Down

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With the 20 to 30 new wells the state estimates that Lakes Michigan and Huron could support, Mr. Silfven said, the potential energy supply is "not insignificant."

Critics disagree. Mr. Davis said that estimates indicated that Michigan had only enough oil under the two lakes to supply its needs for three weeks and only enough gas for eight weeks. Senator Stabenow, citing predictions that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would satisfy only six months of American oil consumption, said the Great Lakes would yield two minutes' worth.

But relative to the disputes over the amount of reserves and ecological harm, the politics reverberate loudly, forcing local elected officials to take a stance. Some Republican governors, like Bob Taft of Ohio and Scott McCallum of Wisconsin, have come out against drilling. Gov. George E. Pataki of New York "would have reservations and concerns about any plans to drill in the Great Lakes," said a spokesman, Joe Conway.

Senator Fitzgerald said, "We do need more domestic production of energy but jeopardizing our drinking water would be too high a price to pay." And Senator George V. Voinovich, Republican of Ohio, said that "the little bit of benefit you'd get" from drilling "would be negligible compared to risks to quality of the lake and the whole ambience of it."

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, a former Republican senator from Michigan who was defeated for re-election last year by Ms. Stabenow, is in an awkward position. Mr. Abraham said on the campaign trail last year and later in testimony before Congress that he personally opposed drilling in the Great

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Lakes, but that he would support the administration's stand, which, while not explicitly stated, gives every impression of favoring drilling.

"He's expressed his personal views," said a spokesman, Joe Davis. "But as a representative of the administration he would make sure that the appropriate cabinet-level agency, which in this case is the Interior Department, deals with the issue."

Some Michigan Republicans in Congress voted recently against drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, hoping that they could then count on Florida lawmakers to oppose drilling in the Great Lakes.

Governor Engler suggests that many politicians professing opposition to drilling, including those in his own party, were capitulating to a public that has been frightened into thinking it is an environmental threat.

"I may be the only one that doesn't have to run for election," said Mr. Engler, noting that term limits keep him from running again in 2002. "I think frankly if one does have to run for election the safe thing is to support a ban and you're a champion. You support what the public thinks it wants and they don't know they're being conned. I'm a lame duck. If I was going to run for anything, I'm not sure what position I would take, to be quite frank."

Several Democrats in the race to replace him have already taken strong positions against drilling. One of them, Representative David E. Bonior, sponsored the House bill that would ban it. The Michigan Senate recently passed a bill that supported lifting the moratorium Mr. Engler imposed in 1997 after environmental concerns were raised.

Mr. Engler said of the proposed drilling, "We have studied this, and we find it very safe."

But even without the Legislature's support, state officials say it is likely that applications for new wells will be accepted by next spring.

The well in Pinconning, which produces natural gas and a small amount of a high-grade oil called condensate, might appear to offer ammunition for both drilling proponents and environmentalists. On the one hand, the well is not especially loud, smelly or obtrusive. On the other, it is next to a game reserve and the land between Lake Huron and the well is carpeted with wetlands flora, like wild carrots and chicory.

"Do you want this thing in an environmentally sensitive area?" said Lyn Walter, a professor of geological sciences at the University of Michigan. "Oh, probably not."

Then again, Professor Walter said, "this is not pristine like Alaska, which hasn't got the bed and breakfasts and all the fudge shops."

And does the amount of oil and gas make it worth the political heat?

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"I think there's some reason for these people to drill there," Professor Walter said, but "this is never going to be the Gulf of Mexico."

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